



'Turkish Man Yelling 'Meow' at an Egg' Is the Best YouTube Video

Written by **DEREK MEAD** (/AUTHOR/DEREKMEAD)

October 17, 2014 // 02:20 PM EST

The Best YouTube Video is an occasional series where Motherboard searches for the best YouTube video ever made, usually on Friday afternoons right before the margarita alarm rings. Previously [The Best YouTube Video: A Dad Discovers Two Motion Detector Trash Cans](#)

(<http://motherboard.vice.com/read/a-dad-discovers-two-motion-detector-trash-cans-is-the-best-youtube-video>).

Humans aren't always very good at understanding the scale of the universe, but what we're worst at envisioning isn't how big our solar system is or just how far away the second Earth is, but how big *we* are.

The truly bonkers thing about the fact that there are more than 7 billion of us on this planet is that we're all still us. Even as the human population has exploded all over the planet, we still have a fundamental connection to each other. Drop yourself anywhere in the world and you'd connect with, emote with, and (well, theoretically at least) mate with the random folks you come across. You can't say the same for an ant, or a bird, or a rock, unless you're an insane person.

That's not to say that we should view the whole world as if it's a lovey-dovey pro-human cheer session, because saying so would make me an idiot. We're still very good at killing each other for no good reason, and we all have that person, like that guy in my soccer game last night, who we probably wouldn't care much about if he or she got run over by a bus. Regardless, we once [numbered in the millions](#)

(http://www.globalchange.umich.edu/globalchange2/current/lectures/human_pop/human_pop now there are billions of us, and yet we're all still humans doing our human things.

'HUH?' IS FOUND EVERYWHERE BECAUSE IT'S
PRETTY HARD TO TALK WITH EACH OTHER (AND
BUILD A SOCIETY) WITHOUT A WORD LIKE THIS

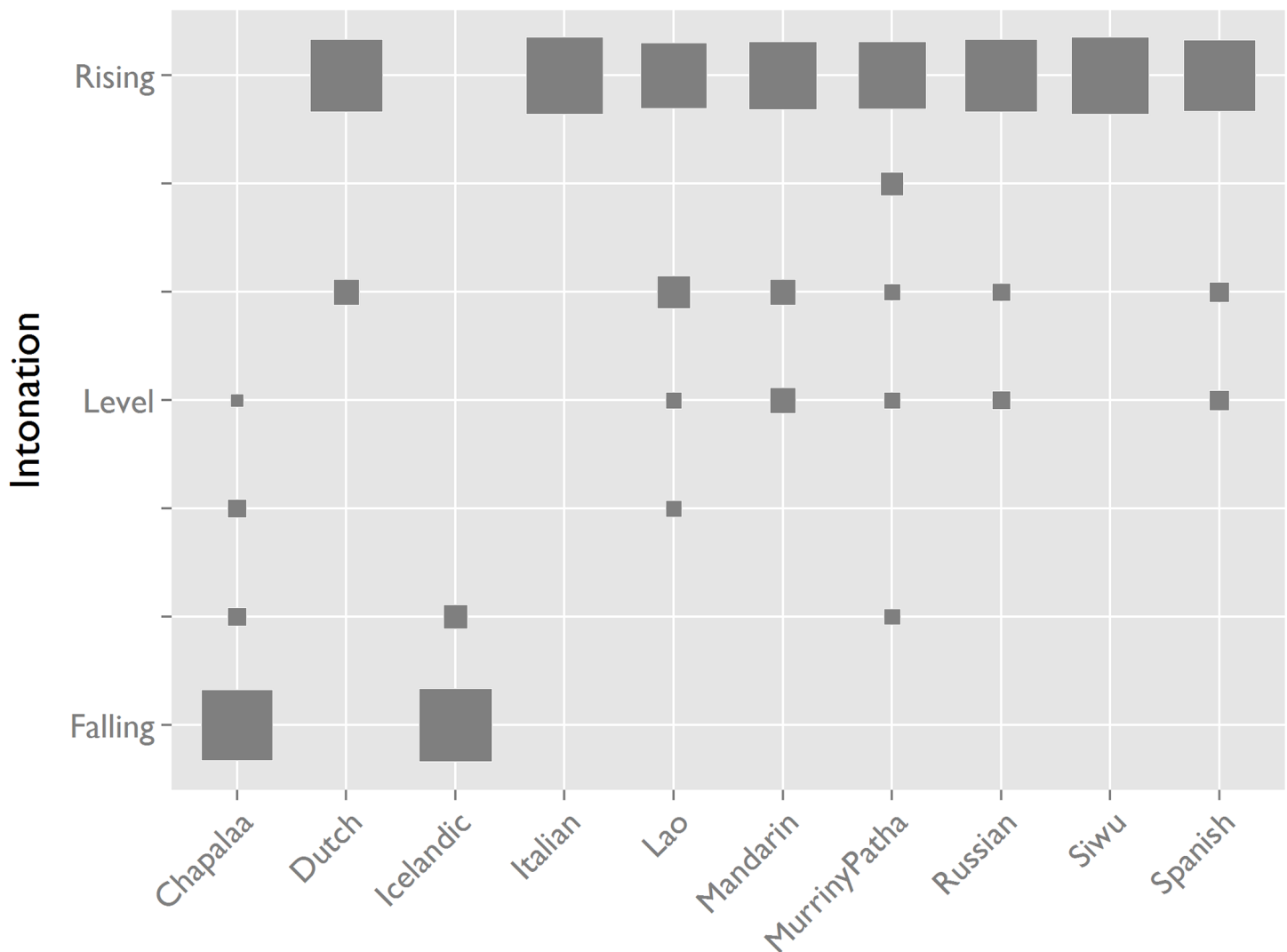
What's remarkable about this is that we still share that fundamental understanding despite having an incredible cultural diaspora that evolves at a rapid pace. You could take a chicken from China and drop it in a coop in Canada and expect it to do chicken things. No one would bat an eye. But the fact that you or I could parachute into Poland and share a laugh at a fart joke with some Joe off the street, despite language and culture difference, is pretty amazing.

This scenario hints at something rather profound for a hypothetical fart joke: Could our innate ability to connect with each other be evidence that we share some sort of universal language?

While scientists might question the rambling way in which we've arrived at their work, this question of how we share language is a popular area of research. To be fair to said researchers, the term "universal language"—the idea that we somehow share an innate language that could be unlocked if we peered deep within ourselves—sounds a bit like something you'd drop while soaking in a mineral bath with old hippies in New Mexico, and it is. What I should actually be talking about is the universality of words.

A great example of this is the word "huh?", which is shared across a wide variety of languages worldwide. But why? A 2013 paper in *PLOS One* (http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0078273?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+plosone%2FPLoSONE-PLOS+ONE+Alerts%3A+New+Articles#s5) delves into exactly that, and argues two important points: "that Huh? is universal, and that it is a word."

The first is relatively straightforward to argue: *Huh?*, used as a phrase to express confusion, perhaps because you misheard what someone said, is used in a similar fashion across a broad range of global languages. In the case of this paper, the trio of researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in The Netherlands found the use of Huh? in "naturally occurring conversations" in 10 languages, and it's surely used in even more.



Even the intonation of "huh?" interjections is pretty similar across a wide variety of languages. Image: PLOS One

([http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0078273?](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0078273?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+plosone%2FPLoSLoSOne+(PLOS+ONE+Alerts%3A+New+Articles#s5))

[utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+plosone%2FPLoSLoSOne+\(PLOS+ONE+Alerts%3A+New+Articles#s5\)](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0078273?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+plosone%2FPLoSLoSOne+(PLOS+ONE+Alerts%3A+New+Articles#s5))

But the second point is the kicker: Humans all sneeze, grunt, and fart in fashions similar enough to be identifiable by anyone, anywhere, but language—words—represent higher-level development, not simply biological function. So if *Huh?* is an actual word, one shared by many languages, it would be evidence that language can evolve convergently.

This is a key distinction. The least-convincing argument for a universal language revolves around the idea that, through a collective consciousness or midichlorians or whatever, we have somehow come to share a language across human civilizations. As we've become more cross-culturally connected, we see this with slang, technical terms, and brand names, but *Huh?* suggests that languages have some universal similarities because we, as humans, have to deal with similar situations no matter what language we speak.

"If you say that 'huh?' 'spread,' it sounds like it goes from language to language, like loanwords. This is not how we think about it," Mark Dingemanse, the lead author of the *PLOS One* study, told me in an email. "This word is found everywhere because it's pretty hard to talk with each other (and build a society) without a word like this; and we argue that it is so similar across all these languages because it fits the same tight niche in our conversations everywhere. Because the pressures of high-speed conversations are such that they squeeze this word into the same shape everywhere."

The need for a quick interjection to interrupt someone when they say something unclear is a universal necessity in language—we're not robots after all, and sometimes we mumble—and this basic, well-defined need has produced a strikingly similar result across a number of languages: Huh?

A word like *Huh?* thus seems to suggest that similarities in language are less the result of some universal language—something that arose as the one true language before it diversified with the spread of humans—and more the product of true convergent evolution. But then there's the flip side: Despite how diverse we all are, we still have to deal with a lot of the same shit. So why are so many of our words different?

"If we put it like this, your question becomes: why are most other words not like this?" Dingemanse wrote. "The answer is twofold: (1) because they are less tightly tied to a particular 'niche' in conversation, and (2) because the need for them is less universal. For instance, see our [FAQ on language contact and 'Coke'](http://huh.ideophone.org/frequently-asked-questions/?trashed=1&ids=5#contact) (<http://huh.ideophone.org/frequently-asked-questions/?trashed=1&ids=5#contact>)."

It's a fine distinction, and Dingemanse is far better equipped to explain it than I am. (I chalk this up to the fact that he studies words for a living, rather than attempting to write them.) I asked him if the universality of *Huh?* hints at an underlying structure to language that is more universal than words, and he said that "indeed it does."

"The way in which we take turns, talk together, and 'repair' communicative problems are all part of an infrastructure for language use that is more fundamental—and, it turns out, more universal—than the particular sounds, words and grammatical rules of languages," he wrote. "Think of it as the plumbing for conversation. If it doesn't work at this level, we're going to be in deep trouble; that's probably why all languages end up with the same kind of system. You can find more about this (including better metaphors than 'plumbing') in the

article we wrote for Scientific American MIND

(<http://www.nature.com/scientificamericanmind/journal/v25/n5/full/scientificamericanmind09164.html>) recently."



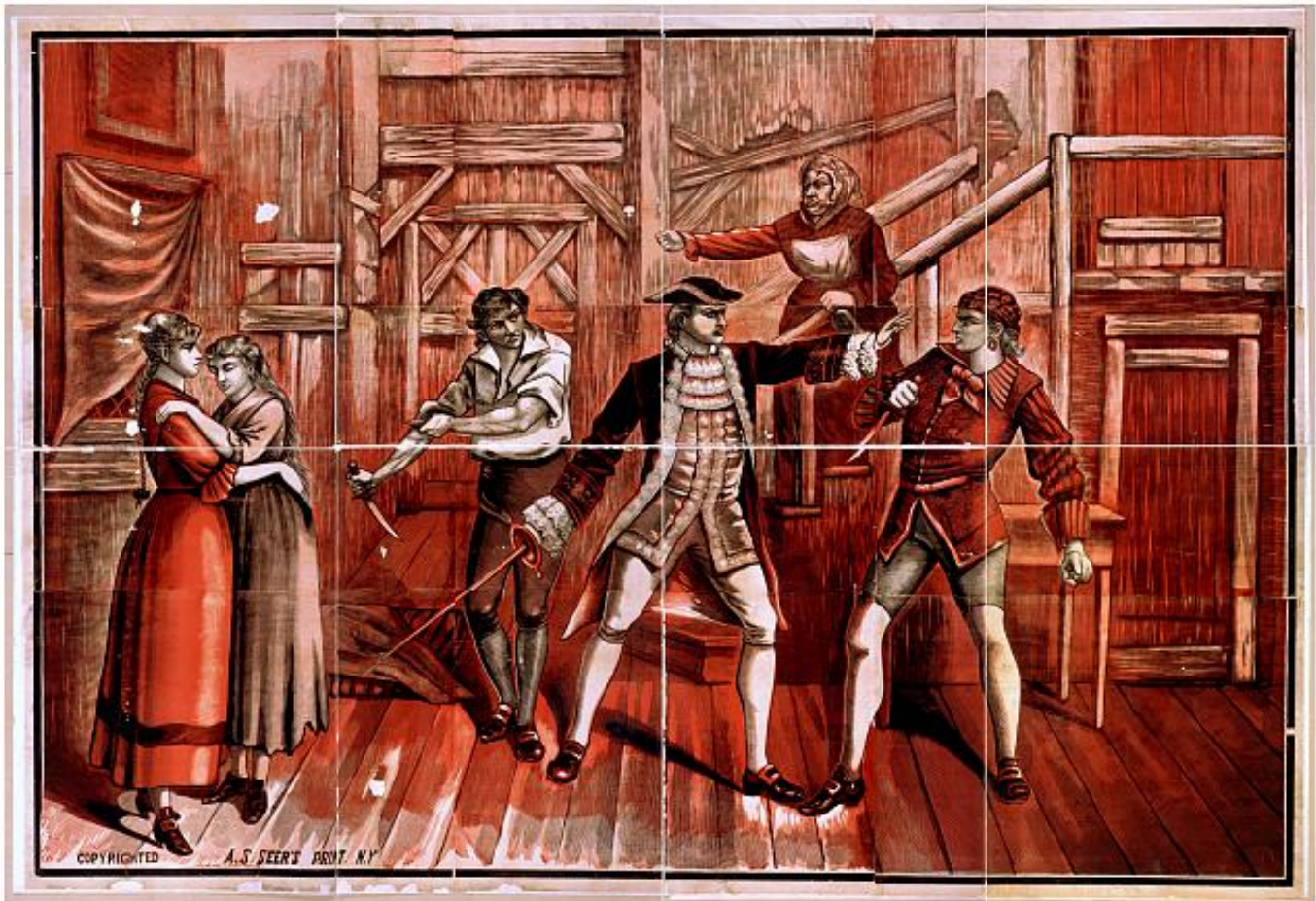
This is a nice explainer on convergent evolution if you're interested.

This evolutionary view of language really does make a lot of sense. Think of how biological evolution works, at least in a simplified view: Organisms face a natural set of challenges and opportunities, and through natural selection, evolve traits that best equip them to exploit a particular niche. And when species evolve under similar conditions, their evolution tends to converge, the most common example being creature that live deep in caves with no sunlight evolving to lose their eyes.

Human language displaying traits of convergent evolution would seem a bit straightforward: We use language to communicate similar needs and emotions, so of course some of the solutions to those specific communication challenges would be the same. While researchers like Dingemanse have developed a lot of objective evidence about the evolutionary aspect of language in recent years, it's been a sticky idea for centuries.

In an illuminating 1965 essay (<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2708496?uid=3739832&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21104947143723>) titled "The Idea of Gesture as a Universal Language in the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries," James R. Knowlson discusses cross-cultural communication from another perspective: how humans work to communicate across language barriers.

Think about the exploration and cultural cross-sharing in the 17th and 18th centuries (and before that, of course): Today, we have guide books and Wikipedia and Rosetta Stone and Google Translate to prepare us for a visit to a new country, but there was a time when people pretty much just showed up and figured things out.



Look at all these historical people gesturing. You can totally tell what's going on, and they didn't even use words. Image: Library of Congress

(<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/var1995002045/pp/>)

How do you initiate trade with someone you can't understand? Well, you wave your hand and point at things, and Knowlson writes that scholar in the pre-Victorian colonial era were obsessed with this idea, and argued that gesture more than anything else points to the root of a universal language evolved to solve the simplest of human communication issues. Naturally, it involves mimes:

[The Greek rhetorician] Lucian recounted, for example, in the dialogue *Of Pantomime*, how a Prince of Pontus, when promised a gift by Nero, requested that he should be granted the services of a well-known mimer, who could replace the various interpreters that he needed to employ in order to communicate with the notables of neighboring lands. At the beginning of the XVIIth century, [Catholic priest] Giovanni Bonifacio, in *l'Arte de' Cenni*, revealed the astonishingly wide range of ideas that could be expressed by the orator's gestures, and suggested that these gestures could in fact provide a highly efficient form of universal language.

And here we come to the genesis of evolved similarities in human language—and the root of language itself: Words are just a tool of expression, and in situations where they are used for highly-specific tasks—expressing a quick emotion, or a very well-defined one—humans tend to develop similar solutions, regardless of the rest of their language. And so we get *Huh?*

Now I suppose it's time to address the elephant in the room: What the hell does any of this have to do with a man meowing at an egg? Well, what struck me as amazing about the above video is the fact that an allegedly Turkish man (a claim I cannot verify, and will not attempt to) meows at an egg in the same way that I do. If there is a root of universality in all of our human language, can it apply to the way we speak with animals (and eggs) as well?

Animal Sound	Danish	Dutch	English	Finnish	French	German	Greek	Hebrew	Hungarian	Italian	Japanese	Portugese	Russian	Spanish	Swedish	Turkish	Urdu
Bee droning	bzzz	buzz	buzz/bzzz	bzz	bzzz	summ summ	zoum zoum	bzzz	bzzz	zzzz	boon boon		zh-zh-zh	bzzz	buzz buzz	vizzz	bzzz
Bird (small)	pip-pip	tjep	cheep/chirp/chirrup/peep	piip		piep piep	tsiou tsiou	tziff-tziff	csip-csirip	chip	pee pee/pii pii		fiyt-fiyt		pip-pip	jiyk jiyk	
Bird (medium)	dit kari jay sige lige sa tit son jay vol		cheep cheep/tweet	tsirk/piip	cui cui	tschiwitt	tsiou tsiou		csirip	chip		pio		pío pío	pip-pip	juyk juyk	
Bird (big)			squawk	kvak			kra kra			hihihi/chip (loudly)			ouh-ouh				
Bird (many birds)			warble/twitter							chip chip							
Camel nuzzing			grumph										ga-a-a-a-h				
Cat mewing	miav	miau	meow	miau	miaou	miau	miaou	miyau	miau	miau	nyan nyan/nyaa nyaa		miyau	miao	mjan mjan	miyav	meow

Image: University of Adelaide (<http://www.eleceng.adelaide.edu.au/personal/dabbott/animal.html>)

It would certainly seem that way. Check out this table (<http://www.eleceng.adelaide.edu.au/personal/dabbott/animal.html>) of cross-lingual animal sounds collected, for reasons unknown, by the University of Adelaide electrical engineering school. (Hat tip to the Grammar Party blog

(<http://grammarpartyblog.com/2012/10/24/meow-miau-nyan/>.) Not only do we humans tend to meow in similar fashion, but we reference tons of animal expressions in the same way.

Is this the result of an inter-species universal language? We're getting pretty far into the weeds here, but there's some affirmative evidence if you don't mind really stretching the definition of language into innate-emotional-response territory.

For example, take a 2009 paper in *Current Biology* ([http://www.cell.com/current-biology/abstract/S0960-9822\(09\)01168-3](http://www.cell.com/current-biology/abstract/S0960-9822(09)01168-3)) titled "The cry embedded within the purr." In it, a team of researchers led by Prof. Karen McComb of the University of Sussex look at how humans interact with cats—and not just when their brains are controlled by cat parasites (<http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/how-brain-parasite-toxoplasma-turns-people-into-cat-loving-zombies>). What they found is that cats' vocalizations have distinct audio qualities that provoke emotional responses in humans. In essence, cats can communicate their needs to humans just by playing off our own innate emotional responses to certain "feed me, I'm needy" sounds.

"When humans were played purrs recorded while cats were actively seeking food at equal amplitude to purrs recorded in non-solicitation contexts, even individuals with no experience of owning cats judged the 'solicitation' purrs to be more urgent and less pleasant," the authors write. "Embedded within the naturally low-pitched purr, we found a high frequency voiced component, reminiscent of a cry or meow, that was crucial in determining urgency and pleasantness ratings."



This photo has nothing to do with anything but came up when I searched Flickr for "meow." The title is "Apocalypse Meow." Image: Tau Zero/Flickr
(https://www.flickr.com/photos/t_zero/13982462240/)

The big question, at least for our purposes, is whether or not this even counts as language. Remember, Dingemanse's team was able to define *Huh?* as an actual word, a learned unit of language, and a cat's purr would appear to be more on the order of a grunt, an instinctual emotional response.

To be fair to McComb's team, they weren't totally looking to answer the question of whether or not our cats can legitimately speak to us, but their work does provide insight. Instinctual or not, it appears that not just humans, but mammals as a whole, may have a predisposition for communication across cultural and species barriers, even if it's extremely simplistic and based on innate emotional cues.

"The structure of solicitation purrs may be exploiting an inherent mammalian sensitivity to acoustic cues relevant in the context of nurturing offspring," they write.

With this in mind, a man yelling a cat's meow at a chicken's egg doesn't seem quite so strange, as knowing that extremely basic communication pathways may exist across species would suggest that said man isn't completely insane.

Of course, there's an obvious flip side to my meow question: Universal language or not, we make the same "meow" sound across languages because all goddamn cats sound the same.

Like Share 264k Follow 48.2K followers YouTube 402K 6.3k
Dingemanse, incredibly generous as he was with his time, indulged me and said that was probably the case.

NEWSLETTER ([HTTP://WWW.VICE.COM/NEWSLETTER?TRK_SOURCE=MOTHERBOARD](http://www.vice.com/newsletter?trk_source=motherboard))

THIS MEOWING TURK ON THE INTERNET IS FURTHER PROOF THAT HUMANS ARE SMARTER THAN EVERYTHING ELSE

"Animal sounds are always fun, but they are similar across languages for a different (and simpler) reason," he wrote. "Assuming that humans have about the same hearing and speaking abilities, there is not going to be a lot of leeway in how we will imitate the sound of a cat. So the word for the sound of a cat is going to be something that sounds like it, adopted to the specific sounds of our language: meow in English, niau in Chinese, miauw in Dutch."

"Words like that (the technical term is onomatopoeia) are relatively limited in the languages of the world," he added. "What's so special about 'huh?' is that it is similar everywhere for a very different reason: something to do with the very infrastructure that keeps our conversations from getting derailed."

Dingemanse wrote that one reason *Huh?* is such a fascinating word is that such a word for expressing confusion in conversation doesn't appear elsewhere in the animal kingdom.

"There are loads of animal communication systems (from ants to birds to apes) but none of this the *huh?* of the *huh?* box' like this," he wrote. "So no matter how primitive we may feel this little word is, it actually seems to be something uniquely human!"

"Only we humans have the social-cognitive wherewithal to not just understand each other, but also understand when we don't understand each other, and then ask for clarification so that we can recover from our mistakes!" he continued. "Seen like this, the humble 'huh?' is actually one of the most important words, and it teaches us a deep lesson about human nature."

So we meow at eggs because all cats sound like they say meow when they ask us for food. But it turns out that *Huh?* is actually proof the humans have highly evolved languages that occasionally converge to solve similar problems faced by the entirety of the human diaspora. And there we have it: This meowing Turk on the internet is further proof that humans are smarter than everything else. Deal with it, cats.

--

TOPICS: The Best YouTube Video (/tag/The+Best+YouTube+Video), language (/tag/language), evolution (/tag/evolution), culture (/tag/culture), linguistics (/tag/linguistics), science (/tag/science), essays (/tag/essays), cats (/tag/cats), meow (/tag/meow), the cat's meow (/tag/the+cat%27s+meow), congrats on making it this far (/tag/congrats+on+making+it+this+far)

SHARE

2 COMMENTS

([HTTP://MOTHERBOARD.VICE.COM/READ/TURKISH-MAN-YELLING-MEOW-AT-AN-EGG-IS-THE-BEST-YOUTUBE-VIDEO-1#DISQUS_THREAD](http://motherboard.vice.com/read/turkish-man-yelling-meow-at-an-egg-is-the-best-youtube-video-1#DISQUS_THREAD))

f FACEBOOK

t TWITTER

g+ GOOGLE PLUS

t TUMBLR

r REDDIT

SUBSCRIBE

STUMBLEUPON

Email Address

Submit

Top stories, new videos, dogs in wigs. Weekly.
RECOMMENDED



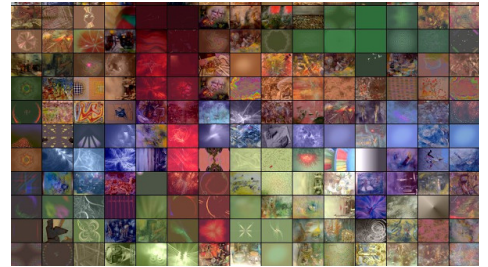
'Cat Rides a Sheep' Is the Best YouTube Video (/read/cat-rides-a-sheep-is-the-best-youtube-video?trk_source=recommended)



'Haunted Microwave' Is the Best YouTube Video (/read/haunted-microwave-is-the-best-youtube-video?trk_source=recommended)



The Brain Molds to Language Early and Permanently (/read/the-brain-molds-to-language-early-and-permanently?trk_source=recommended)



Why ISIS Isn't 'ISIS' or 'Islamic State,' and What We Should Really Call It (/read/why-isis-isnt-isis-or-islamic-state-and-what-we-should-really-call-it?trk_source=recommended)

Scientists Have Discovered Where Our Penises and Clitorises Come From (/read/scientists-have-discovered-where-our-penises-and-clitorises-come-from?trk_source=recommended)

A New Imaging System Beats the Human Eye 12 Times Over (/read/a-new-imaging-system-beats-the-human-eye-12-times-over?trk_source=recommended)



MOST POPULAR



(/read/spaced-out-robot-gardener?trk_source=popular)

Meet the Gardening Robot that Could Grow Fresh Food for Astronauts (/read/spaced-out-robot-gardener?trk_source=popular)



(/read/this-is-how-you-mathematically-predict-lightning-strikes?trk_source=popular)

This Is How You Mathematically Predict Lightning Strikes (/read/this-is-how-you-mathematically-predict-lightning-strikes?trk_source=popular)



(/read/how-the-justice-department-spies-on-you-from-the-air?trk_source=popular)

How the Justice Department Spies on You From the Air (/read/how-the-justice-department-spies-on-you-from-the-air?trk_source=popular)

THE ELECTRONIC MUSIC AND CULTURE CHANNEL FROM **VICE**.

COMMENTS

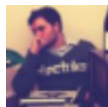
2 Comments

motherboard.vice.com

Login ▾

Sort by Best ▾

Share  Favorite ★



Comrade Massie • a month ago

This is the deepest I've ever seen anyone analyse a man meowing at an egg. Kudos.

5 ^ | ▾ • Share ›



Evy Journey • 23 days ago

What exactly is your point? That there is a universal language? If so, you should have looked into Noam Chomsky's (a highly-respected psycholinguist before becoming a liberal political activist) concept of deep structures (goes beyond "huh" 60 years earlier). Or you want us to appreciate the fact that you've seen the absurdist humor in a man meowing at an egg (in itself a rather absurd situation because, if it were me, I would have said "clack clack" instead of "meow.")

^ | ▾ • Share ›

© 2014 Vice Media LLC

[About](#) [Contact](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Terms of Use](#)

print